BOCES Halves TV Costs, Says Districts Can Make Money

BY TERRY KOCH

GOUVERNEUR — St. Lawrence-Lewis BOCES has cut its proposed interactive television network costs in half, from $6 million to $3 million, by making it a school-districts-only system and cutting back on fiber optics.

And BOCES officials say that between regular BOCES aid and what's called state "shared teacher aid" as it's now set up, school districts could actually, under the right conditions, be making money after five years, rather than ending up in the red.

Six of 18 of the school districts in the St. Lawrence-Lewis BOCES area got that news at a demonstration of the three-school pilot ITV system on Wednesday night in Gouverneur Central.

The prices were cut, the representatives of the school district were told, by relying more heavily on microwave transmission and less on fiber optics.

It would still tie together every school district with every other, but would not have the capacity to serve other agencies like St. Lawrence County, the hospitals, or the colleges, BOCES business manager Riochard Callan said.

If the districts decided later on to increase fiber optics use and improve the system, that would become Phase Two and would be available also for outside agencies.

Phase Two would cost another $3 million.

Wednesday night's session was one of three presentations to school officials that have been broken down into three groups of six districts each. It was attended by administrators and board members from Ogdensburg, Heuvelton, Lisbon, Madrid-Waddington, Morristown, and Hammond.

The trimmed back ITV system, said Callan, would still allow for complete interaction between all districts; would allow tgransmission of computer data back and forth between any of them; would require two studios in each district; and allow "voice-only" or telephone-type conversations as well, without requiring telephone service.

Callan's most surprising information for district officials was that districts could actually make money by participating in the system.

"At the end of five years," he said, "you end up making money on the system. Everyone in is in a revenue receiving mode...Your net cost is a 'you're making money mode,"' Callan said.

That assumes three things:

One assumption is participation by virtually all districts.

The second is an equal formula of one-third sending and two-thirds receiving by each district.

And the third is the continuation of "shared teacher aid" as it's now set up by the state.

Asked if there was a guarantee that shared teacher aid would continue, Callan said "we have every assurance that it will continue."

Shared teacher aid would end up earning money for district partly because, as it's now set up, districts receive money for teachers who are mutually hired but who move from district to district.

But under ITV, a district's existing teacher would teach her class, plus others simultaneously over the network, and would therefore become a "shared teacher" without ever having to be absent from the home district.

Districts need not send and receive on a one-third and two-thirds basis, said Callan, and may decide not to. But his estimates were based on such a setup.

To begin with, the total cost of $3 million would be divided equally among the 18 districts, which amounts to about $166,000 for each school system.

Each district's regular BOCES aid ratio would be applied to that, reducing the cost differently in each district depending on that ratio.

Then the shared teacher aid would be applied.

Ogdensburg's total for example would be $38,838 a year over five years; BOCES aid would amount to $129,000 over the five-year period, bringing the district's total cost over five years to $37,295.

Factoring in telephone savings, computer data transmission savings, and the like, Ogdensburg's net cost is $17.74 per year, Callan said.

Finally, Ogdensburg would, like other districts, be earning revenue after shared teacher aid was applied.

Callan was out of the office this morning and could not be reached for a determination of how much Ogdensburg would earn over the five-year period.

Because the amount of fiber optics has been reduced and microwave increased, there are no right-of-way acquisition costs in the trimmed-back verion. That does not show up until the potential "Phase Two," at $57,500. Fiber optics cable in "Phase One" would cost $532,400, but in Phase Two that cost would jump to $2.4 million.

The initial project also involves hiring an "ITV coordinator," a fulltime maintenance person, and a part-time secretary, plus supplies, at a total of $142,000.

Scheduling Problems, Rapport With Students Aired At Meeting

BY TERRY KOCH

[illegible] scheduling problems and difficulty in creating an immediate rapport with students are the two problems that teachers and administrators working with the pilot interactive television project talked about at a BOCES ITV demonstration Wednesday night.

Officials from six school districts talked to administrators of the Harrisville, Edwards-Knox, and Gouverneur districts about their experiences, and by "remote" they spoke to teachers and students in outlying districts about both the advantages and drawbacks of the system.

Also attending besides BOCES and district officials was State Sen. John McHugh.

"There's a little bit of a problem of rapport with the students," said Harrisville business teacher Shirley Dusharm, talking "remote" from Harrisville with officials in Gouverneur.

"It takes longer to get that rapport," she said, but ultimately "it works out very well."

Dusharm also said there was "a limit to how many students you can keep track of at one time," and if the teacher is beyond her limit, "the students know it."

"Two is all the screens you can handle at one time," she said.

"Watching three rooms at once is difficult."

Bonnie Boettinger, Superintendent of Schools for the Gouverneukr Central School District, said ITV classes range from 12 to 20 students, "depending [illegible] are held in home districts, said Boettinger, and teachers "try to travel once a month to remote sites" to keep in touch with students.

Teachers have been able to schedule "remote" or personal conferences with students regardless of the ITV setup, she said.

There have been few discipline problems, said officials, because the courses offered through ITV are electives and are sought out by the students.

Asked about the loss of direct teacher-student contact, Dusharm said "there is actually almost more attention" paid by both students and teachers in the ITV system, adding the "remote" students "pay more attention to us than our own class."

Harrisville high school principal Lloyd Dashnaw said the biggest problem was scheduling conflicts.

Schools run into problems when classes start at different times of the day, he said, and the districts involved must cooperate to work that problem out.

"At times it got pretty warm (between the districts), "but we worked it out," he said.

"The little things are what make things fall apart," said business instructor Dusharm. "You have to be flexible."

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